



# HUNTSVILLE

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Tommy Battle  
Mayor

April 30, 2014

Honorable Madeline Hughes Haikala, Judge  
United States District Court for  
The Northern District of Alabama  
Hugo L. Black United States Courthouse  
1729 Fifth Ave. N., Room 319 Birmingham, Alabama 35203

Dear Judge Haikala,

You have the unenviable job of determining if the Huntsville Board of Education's Student Assignment Plan "affirmatively furthers desegregation to the extent possible" as directed by the U.S. Justice Department. As Mayor of Huntsville, I have read comments from citizens on both sides of this issue, all whom are my constituents, and I sincerely believe each has the same goal: how do we ensure our children have an equal opportunity in education in an environment free of racial bias?

After carefully reviewing the school system's data and witnessing the system-wide academic and facility improvements led by our new school superintendent, I respectfully ask the court to support the Huntsville School Board plan.

Rezoning school lines is controversial for any city, and Huntsville is no exception. It has been more than 40 years since we last engaged in a comprehensive rezoning effort. It is my understanding the Justice Department initially agreed with 80 percent of the School Board's recommended plan but has proposed an alternate version. It appears we are now down to a "demographer war" on the two plans for your consideration.

The Huntsville City School brief and the Legal Counsel for the national NAACP brief state that the plan put forth by the Huntsville City School Board is best at achieving our goal to further integration and to provide opportunity for all. Many of the letters you have received supporting the Justice Department plan are based on the Justice Department brief. The statements in this brief, however, do not coincide with our research and facts.

The Justice Department plan addresses Huntsville rezoning in terms of African-American and Caucasian students. It does not account for the many Hispanic and Pan-Asian students in our community. Although these students are not covered under the Voting Rights Act, their education and inclusiveness is important for our multicultural community. The Justice plan actually concentrates larger numbers of African-American children and underperforming children in a few schools than the plan offered by the Huntsville School Board.

Four years ago, a study of our School System illuminated the disparity between high achieving schools, with strong student performance, and low achieving schools, where students primarily hailed from low income families. It was a situation our community would not tolerate. The Huntsville City School Board and its newly hired superintendent, Dr. Casey Wardynski, got to work and began rebuilding our school system. They made improvements to the academic program and physical plant along with a financial overhaul. Many facilities were 40-plus years old, in substandard condition and underutilized with low enrollment. As the School Board looked to build new schools and improve efficiencies, it became clear some campuses would need to close, and that would require rezoning.

In three short years, Dr. Wardynski and the School Board have worked diligently to transform our system. As Mayor, I have the opportunity to visit many of our schools. In the past three months, I spent time in at least 25 of our 40 public schools to meet with teachers, students and principals. The turnaround I witnessed from four years ago is dramatic. Across the board, in every school for every child, Huntsville is offering a sound education. "Furthering desegregation to the extent possible" remains a priority, and we can proudly that two of our most successful schools, the magnet schools of AAA and New Century, are largely attended by minority students.

The system's new STAR assessment program ensures that classes across the spectrum achieve educational goals that prescribe advancement at grade levels. Our School Board carefully analyzed the challenges and strengths of each school and instituted an action plan that offers every child an equal opportunity for a high-quality education.

New extended day learning programs help lift struggling students up to grade level and Saturday programs provide enhanced learning. Children cannot learn if they are hungry, and the schools now provide breakfast for every child. They also launched a summer dinner program that provided more than 20,000 hot meals last year to students and their parents. By opening school cafeterias throughout the summer, students and parents are kept educationally aware and invested in the learning process. To that end, our school administrators are extending the academic year for Title One schools through the month of June to give underserved children more opportunities for continued growth and position them for the next school year.

Huntsville City Schools launched a 1:1 digital technology in 2012, affording every child in third – twelfth grade with a personal laptop computer. Many families who never had the means to have a computer in the home are now digitally connected. New technologies and digital textbooks have enhanced learning. Test scores have risen, attendance is up, and discipline problems are down.

To make the Wi-Fi more readily accessible for low-income families, the City partnered with the Schools and Huntsville Housing Authority to provide free Wi-Fi in public housing, on school buses, and at neighborhood community centers. About half of the capital budget for new schools is being invested on schools predominately attended by minority students.

Huntsville takes our charge to provide quality education for all seriously. We have a community that values education and life-long learning. We believe our local School Board and Superintendent has the knowledge and expertise to know what is right for our community and what is best for our children. Our community is committed to equal opportunity for every individual no matter their color, gender, religious affiliation or sexual orientation. We believe in inclusiveness and we hold ourselves accountable.

Judge Haikala, we urgently need an answer on this important matter. The rezoning process started in March 2013 with the building proposals for new schools. In September 2013, the School Board presented the districting plan to the Justice Department. It is now late spring, and our schools are unable to move forward without a decision. Citizens are becoming anxious and need to determine where their children will attend school. Uncertainty is hard on our community, and I respectfully ask that you speed this process along. The local, community rezoning plan is well thought out and meets the approval of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. As the plaintiff, Mr. Norman Chachkin, stated; "counsel is satisfied that the Student Assignment Plan meets Defendants' constitutional obligations in the circumstances of this long-running matter."

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tommy Battle". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tommy Battle  
Mayor

Star of Alabama